

Displacement by PureShores

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Summary:

Pre-season 2. Will tries to readjust to a world where his mom is a wreck, his best friend is in pain, and he doesn't know what to do. AV club friendship and a light sprinkling of Mileven.

Displacement

Author's Note:

So I wanted to write a story about Will, and how he's dealing with being back in the real world and how much things have changed. Just my ponderings about what we might get in season two. I'm looking forward to getting to know the character we know the least about so far, and I hope you enjoy this story.

There's no real shipping in this story, besides some very light Mileven.

Things have been different since he got back. He's been told he only spent a week in the Upside Down, but to him it felt like an eternity, an endless nightmare from which there was no waking up, and no escape.

He's still not sure how he survived. Neither is anyone else, and nobody particularly wants to talk about it, least of all him.

When they let him out of the hospital, the first night at home was rough. Every shadow was a monster; every flicker of light was impending doom. He ended up in his mother's bed that night, terrified of everything, too scared to sleep. She held him tight, rocked him like she used to when he was a baby, and whispered that everything was going to be all right; he was safe.

He didn't believe her, and he could tell she didn't believe herself either. 'Safe' was a myth. 'Safe' was over that night he took the shortcut through Mirkwood just like he always did after hanging out at Mike's. His three best friends, a ten-hour campaign, pizza, soda, Lucas and Dustin bickering like children, Mike, ever the storyteller, weaving the magic of their fantastical adventure. Everything had been so normal, until it wasn't.

He'll never take that shortcut again, can't even travel along it by car without wanting to throw up.

It's been three months now since it happened and he's still not sleeping well. Neither is anyone else in the house from what he can tell. He can hear the music playing softly in Jonathan's room long after midnight, and his mother's light burns for hours after she puts him to bed. He can see the exhaustion in her face, her eyes have dark shadows under them, and he feels guilty, so guilty, because she works so hard all day, and then comes home and worries about him all night.

The Chief comes around every now and then, ostensibly to check on Will, but tends to spend most of the time with his mom, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes late into the night. He hears them talking softly, and he's glad that his mom has someone to lean on.

Still, it's a little uncomfortable to know that most of the time they're talking about him. He knows this because one night, they were fighting, loudly.

"I can't lose him again, Hop," she was saying, and Will could tell by the tremor in her voice that she'd been crying. "I won't survive it, it nearly killed me last time. I can't do it again!"

He could hear the low rumble of the chief's voice, attempting to say something comforting, but his mother was hysterical, screaming over the top of him, until finally, Hopper had had enough.

"Joyce!" he barked. "Enough of this! It's over! The only way they're getting their hands on your son again is over my dead body!"

He didn't hear his mom's reply, because the nausea was coming over him again and he needed to creep to the bathroom and cough up another slug without alerting anyone.

He hasn't told anyone about them because everyone is so relieved that he's back, he doesn't want them to know what he has known since the day he woke up in that hospital bed; this isn't over.

At school, it's like there's a permanent spotlight on him. Teachers eye

him warily, and constantly check up on him. Kids whisper in the halls, in the cafeteria, in gym class. They stare, and point, and he can feel their eyes on him as he goes about his day. His friends do the best they can to shield him from the brunt of it, they tell off the worst offenders and keep a ring of protection around him when they're in crowded areas. But they can't be with him all the time, and none of them are in that dreaded gym class, so for a few hours a week, he's on his own.

He was never any good in gym, and now he's even worse because he feels ill all the time, and the slightest things can trigger a flashback to that place. The squeaking of sneakers on the floor reminds him of how all the doors in the Upside Down squeaked when he pushed them, and how he'd panic that the monster would hear the noise and hunt him down there and then. He kind of folds into himself, stays far away from the action, and doesn't talk to the other kids; with the result that they now think he's even weirder than ever.

It's always a relief when the class ends and his friends are waiting for him in the cafeteria. Sometimes, Mike has gone ahead and collected his food for him so he doesn't have to face the lunch line. He tends to do it on days that Will feels particularly low, and Will wonders how he knows. But then, Mike has always been perceptive about other people's feelings. Or maybe Will just isn't hiding it as well as he hopes he is.

At the lunch table, Dustin cracks jokes, Lucas talks about comics and movies, and Mike has taken to glancing around the room every few minutes to check that nobody's watching them. If somebody is, he sends an icy glare his or her way that Will would never have suspected him to be capable of. Something has changed in Mike since it happened, he seems harder somehow, a little tougher. Lucas and Dustin exchange meaningful glances when he brings up the subject one day while they're waiting for Mike at the bike racks, and try, hesitantly, to explain.

"Did we ever tell you that he took on Troy?" asks Lucas, and Will shakes his head. "It was at your memorial thing at school. Troy was being a dick, as usual, and Mike called him out in front of everyone. Then pushed him."

Will is surprised to hear this. Mike has always stood up for them against the bullies, yes, but he usually sticks to yelling insults and not physical aggression. Troy and James are a lot bigger than they are after all.

“What’d Troy do?”

Here, Lucas and Dustin exchange wry smiles. “Nothing,” says Lucas. “El was there and she stopped him. Literally.”

“It was so cool,” breaks in Dustin, enthusiastically. “He just like, froze. And then she made him piss his pants.”

Of course, the pants-pissing episode has already been described to Will before, and he wishes very much he’d been there to see it. But Eleven’s superhuman exploits have been retold to Will several times, and awesome as they are to hear about, they aren’t really answering his question.

“I know Eleven was a superhero.” It doesn’t feel right for him to call her El, like the others do. He’s never met her or talked to her, save for that brief encounter in the Upside Down. He hasn’t earned that privilege. “But what does it have to do with Mike?”

“It was like...” Lucas casts around for the right way to put it; Mike has always been the wordsmith in their gang. “It was like he looked around and thought nobody at school actually cared about what had happened to you, except us,” he explains. “And it made him so mad, he could barely see straight. We knew you weren’t dead by then, because we’d heard you on the supercom, and we were trying to find some way else to contact you.”

“That’s why El was with us,” Dustin puts in. “We thought if we got her to a stronger radio, it would help. But Mr Clarke found us before we got there, and made us go to the assembly.”

“It was like we were hitting walls at every turn, and Mike, he just kinda...snapped,” Lucas concludes. “And he hasn’t ever really been the same since.”

It’s hard for Will to hear that. His experience in the Upside Down is

probably the worst thing that's ever happened to him, because it's not only screwed him up, but everyone else he cares about as well. His mom is a nervous wreck, and looks at him like he's going to disappear into thin air at any moment. Jonathan is overprotective; the kids at school think he's a freak. Dustin and Lucas try to carry on like everything is normal, but he can tell they're waiting for the other shoe to drop too. And Mike bounces around between a deep depression, an occasional (very forced) cheer, and such an intense anger that sometimes Will's a little unnerved by it.

It's all his fault. He's caused them all so much pain.

Mike approaches, greets them shortly, claiming he needs to get home quickly because his mom needs him for something. They recognise the lie, but can tell he's in one of those moods; the kind where all he wants to do is sit alone in the fort in the basement and not be disturbed, so they let him go without argument. He bids them goodbye, then swings himself onto his bike and pedals away without a backward glance.

It's Lucas who breaks the silence, when they too have jumped on their bikes and left school behind for another week.

"What do you think set him off this time?" he asks Dustin, who shrugs.

"Could've been anything. Someone in a pink dress, chocolate pudding, a picture of the Millennium Falcon. I don't think even *he* knows half the time." He shakes his curly head. "Just when I think he's finally starting to get over her, we're back to square one."

"I don't know that you just 'get over' something like that," says Lucas, thoughtfully. "Pretty much every movie in existence says you don't. Not really."

"This isn't a movie, Lucas," Dustin snaps.

"Wish it had been. Then we could've just switched it off."

Usually they all hang out at Mike's after school and on weekends because it's the biggest, but today since he clearly isn't in the mood for company, they head for Lucas' instead. They eat snacks, drink soda, read comics; Dustin and Lucas fight over whether Luke Skywalker or Han Solo is better and as soon as darkness falls, Jonathan arrives with the car to take Will home. It's been another lazy afternoon; the kind he thought he'd never experience again while he was in the Upside Down, but it doesn't feel right without Mike there. They've been a group of four since the fourth grade, when Dustin arrived. If things had worked out differently they'd probably be a group of five by now, with the addition of Eleven, but instead Mike's AWOL, he himself is taking random flashback trips to the Upside Down and the other two are doing their best to pretend everything is normal and not screwed up.

It's not until he's in bed later, (after his mum has checked on him twice) that he pulls out the supercom and tries to raise Mike on it. He's fairly confident that his best friend won't be asleep yet, as it's not very late. Even so, it's a few minutes before Mike answers, somewhat unenthusiastically.

"Hi Will. Are you okay?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing."

"Of course I'm okay, why wouldn't I be?" Mike sounds a little annoyed by the question. "I told you I had to go help mom with something."

"I know." There's a long pause, as Will debates whether he actually has the guts to say what he's about to say next. He doesn't want to, but he has to. Somebody has to ask Mike the question nobody wants to ask. "Was it just that though? Or were you also thinking about, you know, her?"

The delicate inflection he places on the last word is enough to convey to Mike exactly who he means by it, and it certainly isn't his mother. Unsurprisingly, Mike goes instantly on the defensive.

"So what if I was?" he snaps. "Just because the others are happy to pretend she never existed doesn't mean I have to be!"

"I don't think that's true," Will contradicts him, gently. "I think they're just trying to put the whole thing behind them, and they're worried about you. I am too."

"I tell you, I'm fine," says Mike, irritably. "Besides, if there's anyone we've got to worry about, it's you. You've been different since you got back. We've all noticed."

Will sighs. So his theory is right. He isn't hiding it as well as he thinks he is.

"Okay," he says. "You're right. It's been...tough."

"Why didn't you say something?" Mike demands to know. "If you didn't want to talk to your mom or Hopper, you could have told us!"

"Mom and Jonathan already worry about me too much," he explains. "And you guys have got enough to deal with without my problems too."

There's silence for a moment, and he knows they're both considering how messed-up their lives have gotten since that fateful night he took the Mirkwood shortcut. They've seen things that most people don't even know exist. They've lost so much, but somehow come out on the other side. They are four ordinary kids from Hawkins (plus one extraordinary one) that got trapped in a nightmare and somehow made it out, but not without cost.

"I don't think I ever thanked you guys," he says, quietly. "I know it was mom and Hopper who actually found me but you guys never gave up on me either. You kept looking for me even when they tried to tell you I was dead. You found the gate. You took on that...that thing."

"That was El, not us," Mike corrects him. "Sure, we tried to fight it, but all we had were rocks. If it hadn't been for her, we'd have been dead. Guaranteed. And hearing you on the radio, finding you in the Upside Down, that was her too."

Will smiles. This is classic Mike. He has never been the type to take credit for someone else's achievements; whenever they did science

fair projects he almost made sure to include precisely what each of them had contributed to the report, so everyone got the credit they deserved.

“I’m so glad we got you back,” Mike goes on. “And I know I only knew her for a week...but I miss her, Will. I really miss her.”

Something about the hesitant delivery tells Will that this is the first time Mike has actually admitted this to anyone, possibly even himself, and he remembers how Dustin had described the moment when Mike and Eleven had first met.

“It was the kind of thing that only happens in chick movies. He looked at her and she looked at him, and that was kind of just...it. He was a goner, there and then. Just none of us realised it yet.”

“I wish I could have met her,” says Will, sincerely. “I want to thank her. She went back into that place to help me, and take it from me; once you’ve been there you do *not* want to go back. And I don’t know if I would have wanted to come back to a Hawkins without my best friends in it.”

Mike chuckles a little. “I know what you mean. Our best friend just disappeared off the face of the Earth once. Maybe I’ll tell you the story sometime.”

They both laugh a little at that, and it feels good. For the first time since he’s been back he feels useful, even if just to make Mike laugh. He owes him this, owes them all, because they sacrificed so much to get him back and he can never, ever truly repay them all for what they’ve done for him.

But it’s a start.

Author's Note:

Thanks for reading, and bring on season 2!